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ABSTRACT

An evaluation team was formed to sponsor research designed to improve the conduct and utilization of federally funded evaluations. The research projects assigned to the team reflected existing priorities for evaluation research, mainly by third party studies of existing urban area educational programs. It was found that something was seriously lacking in the utilization of such studies. It seemed that the traditional third party structure for evaluations was a constraint on use, and the evaluations were not sufficiently responsive to client needs. It was found that evaluation activity at the local level was basically independent of the more visible national evaluations. The majority of these local evaluations dealt with the topic of student achievement, and testing was the dominant method of data collection. The different aims and methodologies of large, federally sponsored evaluations of school programs and those of local school districts are analyzed. It is suggested that conventional wisdom, based on large scale program evaluation, may not be applicable to local situations and evaluation utilization. (JD)

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NIE-Funded Studies of Local Evaluation *

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In 1978, the Testing, Assessment and Evaluation Division (TAE) was created within NIE. Within TAE, an Evaluation Team was formed to sponsor research designed to improve the conduct and utilization of evaluations.

The research projects initially assigned to TAE reflected existing priorities for evaluation research. Included was a field evaluation of a multi-site demonstration located in urban areas, the Cities-in-Schools program. The evaluation was a third party study conducted at the request of the Secretary of HEW. Shortly thereafter, a second urban field evaluation was started, this time of Reverend Jesse Jackson's Push for Excellence program, and again at the request of the Secretary of HEW. TAE also inherited some individual methodological grants from elsewhere and assumed responsibility for monitoring research on evaluation at two of the network of regional laboratories and national centers funded by NIE, namely the Center for the Study of Evaluation (CSE) and the Northwest Regional Educational Laboratory (NWREL).

Several of the staff of the new Evaluation Team had extensive prior experience with large field evaluations similar to Cities-in-Schools and Push for Excellence. Over the past decade staff had been involved in national evaluations of Educational Performance Contracting, Vouchers, Experimental Schools and Experince-Based-Career Education, to name a few.

Our experiences by 1978 led us to believe something was seriously lacking in the utilization of such studies. In part, it seemed the traditional third party structure for evaluations was a constraint on use and in part that evaluations were not sufficiently responsive to their

audiences' needs. Our thinking on these issues was significantly jogged by a paper written by Dr. Stephen Weiner and Associates, then associated with the Stanford University Evaluation Consortium, entitled "Pathologys in Institutional Structures for Evaluation and a Possible Cure".[1]

Weiner et. al. viewed institutional structures and related pressures to be more conducive to explaining utilization failures than explanations centering on the actions of individual evaluators. Thus, for example, the built-in institutional pressures for program managers to have successful programs, for evaluators to gain repeat business and for local program officials to simply try and get the evaluation over produced the "pathology" of nonproductive behavior at all levels related to evaluation use.

Based on their own experiences as well as the Weiner paper, TAE staff sought to try innovative approaches to increasing evaluation utilization. One of these was to alter the traditional structure for Federally-funded third party evaluations.[2] A second was to test conscious strategies to develop better communications with and involvement of stakeholders to evaluations in the conduct of the studies. Our evaluations of both Cities-in-Schools and Push for Excellence incorporate these stakeholder strategies. They are being discussed elsewhere, here this morning[3]. In addition, we have funded the Huron Institute of Cambridge, Massachusetts to study the efficacy of the stakeholder strategy in improving evaluation utilization. Their first report in a three year study will be available in early 1981.

Challenging as these events were, two events early in TAE's history led us to believe that we were still missing something important in the field of evaluation. That something had to do with evaluation activity at the local level conducted within LEA's basically independent of the episodic, if more visible national evaluations we were more familiar with.

The first event was a conference TAE sponsored in 1978 to assist its initial formulation of long range plans to improve evaluations. Fifteen staff from local education agencies--teachers, principals and research and evaluation directors wrote -- wrote about and discussed LEA needs related to testing and evaluation. As indicated in the proceedings of this event, now being published[4], the school people didn't clamor for new technological breakthroughs in testing and evaluation. Rather, they sought better information on practices now available that worked and means to communicate findings better.

The second event was the completion in December 1978 by CSE of the study "Evaluation and School Districts"[5]. Initiated by Dr. Adrianne Bank, a presenter here and directed by Dr. Catherine Lyon, the study was virtually the only one of its kind existent in describing the practice of educational evaluation in school districts.

Based principally on a nationally-representative sample of districts with enrollments of over 10,000 students (and later supplemented by studies in smaller districts as well) the CSE study for the first time provided generalizable answers to questions such as:

- o What are the activities of offices of evaluation?
- o How are they organized?
- o Who are their clients?
- o How are they affected by school district characteristics?

Some of the findings were:

- o 43% of districts enrolling 10,000+ have a central office responsible for program evaluation;

- o almost all (89%) metropolitan districts had such an office;
- o evaluation offices generally do not report directly to the Superintendent--37% do so, 46% do not--the biggest single location for those who do not is in instruction offices;
- o 97% report their budgets are 1% or less of their district budgets;
- o two-thirds of respondents reported their personnel resources were inadequate;
- o generally, administrative rather than instructional personnel are perceived to be using evaluation unit data.

What was even more interesting was findings related to the dominant mode of "evaluations" in school districts: some 78% of respondents agreed that student achievement was the dominant topic of data collection and similar numbers agreed that testing was the dominant method of data collection. In effect, "evaluation" is testing at the local level. With all due respect for testing, it seemed like a sterile view of evaluation developments then in progress, such as greater use of qualitative data and the like.

Just as TAE was trying to increase evaluation utilization in large scale studies, so we pondered how to do so for local evaluation activities of the kind described by CSE. Our initial thoughts took two forms. CSE did identify some districts in its study that seemed to be making exemplary use of evaluation data. That finding in part led us to commission a new study to further investigate such usage. The contract was awarded competitively to the Huron Institute. Huron's first report will be available early in 1981.[6]

Second, we sought to envision ways in which evaluation could be made more useful for constructive local purposes such as improving instruction,

as well as compliance-related needs such as meeting Federal or state evaluation requirements. Last year and this, the Methodology Section of the annual Teaching and Learning Grants Announcement has sought research to show how evaluations could be made more constructively useful at the local level.

During and since the time of the Lyon study, CSE has continued research into evaluation at the local level. In addition, in 1979 TAE assumed responsibility for monitoring the Evaluation Research Program directed by William Cooley at the Learning Research and Development Center of the University of Pittsburgh.

Demonstrating that nature abhors a vacuum, even in academe, Bill has successfully placed LRDC in the role of a research and evaluation office for some purposes in the Pittsburgh School District. Building on that successful incursion, he is now studying the use of evaluative information within the District.

Patterns of similarities and differences regarding evaluation activity at the local level will be seen in this symposium. One general conclusion however, seems warranted to me regardless of any specifics involved. That is how little we know to date about the world of local evaluation activity and how little it seems to resemble that of large scale program evaluations that we in TAE and I suspect you as well are more familiar with. I have started to use the phrase "local evaluation activity" consciously in light of the apparent differences. In part, "local evaluation activity" might refer to a more or less continuous process of collecting information rather than discrete studies. It might not refer to "programs" at all, rather being focused on general educational or social conditions in the district. Other differences may be revealed in the symposiums.

We draw upon the literature of evaluation for guidance about how to proceed in the future. The literature, however, is very long on information about large scale educational evaluations and their implications and very short about local evaluation activity. Boruch in a wide ranging review of educational evaluation and evaluation policy in 1979 notes his information "consist largely of experience generated by large scale program evaluations."[7] Elsewhere, in his appraisal of program evaluations at Federal, state and local levels just completed for the Congress ('Holtzman Study'), Boruch observes:

> "We are aware of only two formal attempts to obtain survey information about how local resources are expended within a school district to answer different kinds of evaluation questions."[8]

One of these efforts was a 1978 study by William Webster of the Dallas School District and Dan Stufflebeam of Western Michigan University focused on 35 directors of research in urban school districts.[9] The second is the CSE study cited earlier.

Much of what we know will be discussed here, perhaps including relevant findings from the Holtzman Study, given that Bob Boruch is a discussant.

Suffice to say here that the "testing only" model of local evaluation revealed by the CSE study is disquieting. It lacks so many elements of any formal conception of evaluation that it is not worth pursuing the topic here. One might keep in mind this morning the question of how much local evaluation activity conforms to our normal concepts of evaluation, including the concepts of valuing, contributing to decisionmaking, explanation and the like. If local evaluation activity does not conform to these "norms", then we ought to look at it again and see how much our conventional wisdom based on large scale program evaluation is applicable.

I suspect a lot of that conventional wisdom is not applicable. If so, we need to rethink our perceptions of local evaluation activity and how research might contribute to its usefulness.

FOOTNOTES

1. Stephen Weiner et. al. "Pathology Institutional Structures in Evaluation and a Possible Cure." Testing, Assessment and Evaluation Division Research Note. Washington, D.C.: National Institute of Education, 1981, in press.

2. Charles Stalford, "Social Structure of Third Party Evaluations" in New Directions for Program Evaluation, 5, 1980.

3. Norman Gold, "The Stakeholder Process in Educational Program Evaluation." Paper presented at the Annual Meeting of the Evaluation Research Society, Washington, D.C., November 21, 1980.

4. Charles Stalford (ed.) Testing and Evaluation in Schools: Practitioners' Perspectives. Washington, D.C.: National Institute of Education, 1980, in press.

5. Catherine Lyon et. al. Evaluation and School Districts. Los Angeles: Center for the Study of Evaluation, UCLA, December 1978.

6. Mary Kennedy, The Role of Evaluation and Testing Information in Public Schools, Cambridge: The Huron Institute, January 1981.

7. Robert Boruch and Paul Wortman, "Implications of Educational Evaluation for Evaluation Policy," in Review of Research in Education, 7. Washington, D.C.: American Educational Research Association, 1979.

8. Robert Boruch and David Cordray, An Appraisal of Educational program Evaluations: Federal, State and Local Agencies. Evanston: Northwestern University, June 1980. Submitted to U.S. Department of Education.

9. William Webster and Daniel Stufflebeam, "The State of Theory and Practice in Educational Evaluation in Large Urban School Districts." Unpublished manuscript. Kalamazoo: Western Michigan University, 1978.